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Animal Death and Religion: Revisiting Creaturely Vulnerability, Mourning and Sacrifice

Men! The only animal in the world to fear!

D. H. Lawrence, *Mountain Lion*

Ah death, death

You are no solution! [...]

Only life has a way out.

And the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility

In life.

D. H. Lawrence, *Man and Bat*¹

If the question of animal death and dying seems to loom large on the horizon of human-animal studies, it is indeed baffling to consider its ever more frequent occurrence in the field of religion. Its scholars have recently become concerned not only with the multiple meanings of animal presence in human religious experience (as objects/bodies), but also with the more subversive issue of actual animal responses to death that seem to have a clear religious significance, leading to a revision of the anthropocentric view of what constitutes religion. Various animal ways of performing ritual, especially ones foregrounding bodily vulnerability and mourning (evidenced in empirical research but also captured poignantly in a number of literary descriptions) appear to overlap with the way human societies construe religious behaviour as social and motivated by the

¹ David Herbert Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, ed. D. Ellis (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 330, 280.

sense of suffering, loss and mystery. It is thus instructive to look at the relationship between animal death and religion in detail.

The present article attempts to discuss different aspects of animal bodily existence, including animal susceptibility to injury and death, from the double perspective of literature and religion, by moving from a detailed analysis of works of contemporary literature dealing with human-animal violence and its possible religious overtones to more abstract questions concerning the place of animals in human religious ritual, systems of belief and philosophies of living. The close scrutiny of literary texts is aimed not only at showing the ever broadening scope of the compassionate imagination of writers and readers as they strive to conjure up the community of vulnerability and suffering that transcends the boundaries of the species. It also wishes to present religious experience, accompanying the most potent moments of human physical existence (such as birth, suffering and death), as the realm of social affect and bodily response that can be extended to refer to the behaviour of various groups of animals. The argument for the redefinition of religion draws upon the neo-materialist and posthumanist framework, prompted by the recent findings in evolutionary biology that sees a line of continuity between human and animal symbolic behaviour. This accords with the intuitions of some 20th-century writers. The case their literary work makes for the actual engagement of animals in the human rites of passage – the way animals become a “grievable” presence, calling for the gestures of remembrance or even religious celebration – reflects a more general tendency among the humanities scholars to reconsider the notion of human exceptionality based on the religious and metaphysical view of what constitutes personhood, and to bridge the gap between humans and animals as religious subjects.

The paper argues it is no longer sufficient to deal with animals in religious thinking and practice as mere objects that stand silently at the background of more elevated human pursuits. There is a growing body of research at the intersection of religious studies, theology, philosophy and cognitive ethology that suggests a clearly ritualistic quality of some animal lives, including what appears to be highly individual responses of higher animals to death.² It thus seems vital to identify points of convergence between human and animal experience which challenge a simple exclusion of nonhuman others from the sphere of religion and spirituality, such as being engaged in acts of mourning and being oneself mournable (a life worth grieving) in Judith Butler’s sense of

² Starting with the work of cognitive ethologists like Mark Bekoff and anthropologists like Barbara J. King, much of the empirical research on the animal affect suggests that a number of animal individual and social responses to natural phenomena and traumatic events appear to involve elements of the ritual. See the following article for a more accurate description, as well as bibliographical references: Donovan O. Schaefer, “Do Animals Have Religion? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion and Embodiment,” *Anthrozoös*, 2012, Vol. 25, Supplement, 173–189.

the term.³ Admittedly, the use of such categories to describe animals is socially transgressive inasmuch as it threatens to erode the deeply sacrificial structure of Western thinking (where sacrifice denotes an instrument of human power translating both into a denial of the mere possibility of religious agency in animals and common consent to violence done to animals on a massive scale).⁴ The sacrificial framework is what in fact accounts for the almost visceral negative reactions of most believers at the mere thought of identifying animals as religious. The aim of the paper is thus to tackle the question of human-animal differentiation as fundamental in the field of religion and to point to the potential of transgressive compassion as a way of redeeming religious thinking in its most speciesist aspects.

Violence, Masculinity and the Animal “Last Rites”: Ian McEwan

Ian McEwan’s 1975 short story *First Love, Last Rites* is an unlikely occurrence in the discussion of the religious dimension of animal living. It has commonly been described as a story of adolescence and sexual initiation, revolving around strictly human questions of the hesitant adolescent sense of the self, its ongoing search for gender identity and discovery of the concurrent beauty and repulsiveness of the physical contact with the other sex that accompanies the painful process of a young man’s coming of age. Like most of the author’s early pieces, it is located half-way between innocence and experience,⁵ forbidding both the sentimental retreat into the child’s naiveté and the slide into the inflated omniscient ego of the adult. The impression of catching the shamefaced adolescent red-handed is conveyed by the use of the first-person narrator who feels mostly

³ The notions of grievability and mourning are discussed by Judith Butler (exclusively in the human sense) in the following works: *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004); *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009); and “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2012), 134–151. I address the possibility of the non-anthropocentric reading of these terms in the article: “Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective,” *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 51, no. 04 (2018) (forthcoming).

⁴ For the account of sacrifice as a metaphysical structure that both sustains the notion of a religious subject as solely human and opens the space for the social sanctioning of violence to animals (elaborating on J. Derrida’s thinking), see Aaron S. Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion. Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 137–146.

⁵ Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1994), 6.

insecure about his newly established masculinity and is only learning to keep his vulnerable, fragile, emotional self under control. Disturbingly, however, the whole journey towards self-knowledge is haunted by an animal presence, as if the natural-cultural processes of human maturation had to be accompanied by a simultaneous effort to define the masculine self's relationship to other living beings. The pangs of the first-love's desire play out against the background of eel hunting adventure that is supposedly the first serious attempt to earn one's living. Moreover, the lovemaking scenes are continually interrupted by mysterious scratching noises from behind the wall that the narrator at first locates as part of his erotic fantasy of creating a new monstrous life by impregnating a woman, only to find out later on that the creature is more than real, and abjectly so:

I was drawn into fantasies against my will, fantasies of the creature, and afterwards when we lay on our backs on the huge table, in those deep silences I heard it faintly running and clawing. [...]

Then once I was inside her I was moved, I was inside my fantasy, there could be no separation now of my mushrooming sensations from my knowledge that we could make a creature grow in Sissel's belly. I had no wish to be a father, that was not in it at all. It was eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws, inches from my cock's end the unstoppable chemistry of a creature growing out of a dark red slime, my fantasy was of being helpless before the age and strength of this process and the thought alone could make me come before I wanted. [...]

I knew it was my own creature I heard scrabbling, and when Sissel heard it one afternoon and began to worry, I realized her fantasies were involved too, it was a sound which grew out of our lovemaking. We heard it when we were finished and lying quite still on our backs, when we were empty and clear, perfectly quiet. It was the impression of small claws scratching blindly against a wall such a distant sound it needed two people to hear it.⁶

The sound seems to be at first a figment of imagination, symbolizing the male lover's overwhelming desire to renounce his individual self and to merge with the insatiable drive of all nature to reproduce. "Eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws" are all part of the ever-renewing mechanism of animal biological life that he vaguely identifies himself with, without even understanding its complicated workings. The narrator thus succumbs to the generative-destructive process, which also involves revelling in the most abject moments of the functioning of feminine flesh, its fluid secretions and excretions ("We made love in Sissel's copious, effortless periods, got good and sticky and brown with the blood and I thought we were the creatures now in the slime"⁷). Acknowledging the ambiguity of bodily borders by allowing defilement with

⁶ Ian McEwan, *First Love, Last Rites* (London: Vintage, 1997), 85-86.

⁷ McEwan, *First Love, Last Rites*, 88.

menstrual blood and asserting one's basic continuity with animal body parts has the effect of undermining the long-standing patriarchal system of clear-cut differences between the self and the surrounding world, to recall Julia Kristeva's argument.⁸ Once the scrabbling sound behind the wall becomes more and more persistent, however, this identification with the bodily, animalistic and instinctual has to be thrown into doubt and, finally, overcome by the reestablishment of the calm calculating mind, with its need for the aggressive assertion of independence and resolution to suppress the chaotic feminine corporeality. As the standard interpretation of the story has it, it is at this point that the masculine ego of the hero needs to disentangle himself from the world in order to be able to control it as an adult human.

The rejection of the animal body is nonetheless marked by moral ambivalence which, as I would like to show, curiously emancipates the creaturely world behind it through a quasi-religious gesture of remembrance. Importantly, this episode takes place against the background of an unsuccessful hunting adventure. As the narrator once walks home from his spoiled fishing trip with a single eel in his bucket, he finds his girlfriend sitting on the bed and terrified of the huge rat that has happened to run across the room, dragging its belly on the floor. A haunting noise of scratching claws in the distance turns into an even more terrifying, tangible presence of the rodent that is, importantly, an animal most feared and hated by humans in their symbolic effort to keep their abode clean and clearly separated from the natural environment. The rat, a fat filthy figure visualized here with "bared teeth," which stands both for the animal itself and the abject aspect of the human, has to be beaten to death in order to fend off the image of masculine vulnerability and dependency on the feminine and animal flesh. The reader witnessing the violent scene is however startled by the concluding sentences of the story which reveal the victim to be a pregnant mother with five unborn fetuses crouching inside her womb. The striking depiction results paradoxically in reaffirming the creature's resemblance to an expecting human female that the narrator has constantly imagined his girlfriend to be. The scene is both revolting and moving:

The frenzied rat was running through the gap, it was running at my feet to take its revenge. Like the ghost rat its teeth were bared. With both hands I swung the poker down, caught it clean and whole smack under its belly and it lifted clear off the ground, sailed across the room borne up by Sissel's long scream through her hand in her mouth, it dashed against the wall and I thought in an instant, it must have broken its back. It dropped to the ground, legs in the air, split from end to end like a ripe fruit. [...] It rolled on its side, and from the mighty gash which ran its belly's length there obtruded and slid

⁸ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 71-72.

partially free from the lower abdomen a translucent purple bag, and inside five pale crouching shapes, their knees drawn up around their chins. As the bag touched the floor I saw a movement, the leg of one unborn rat quivered as if in hope, but the mother was hopelessly dead and there was no more for it. Sissel knelt by the rat, Adrian and I stood behind her like guards, it was as if she had some special right, kneeling there with her long red skirt spilling round her. She parted the gash in the mother rat with her forefinger and thumb pushed the bag back inside and closed the blood-spiked fur over it. She remained kneeling a little while and we still stood behind her. Then she cleared some dishes from the sink to wash her hands. We all wanted to get outside now so Sissel wrapped the rat in newspaper and we carried it downstairs. Sissel lifted the lid of the dustbin and I placed it carefully inside.⁹

Rather than reading the scene in psychoanalytic terms as a “displaced murder of the mother,”¹⁰ necessary for the cultural constitution of masculinity to take place, I would like to draw attention to its more hidden religious meaning. As the title of the story suggests, its focus is not only on the pleasures and pains of first love, but also on the horror and sadness of performing and receiving the “last rites.” The latter can obviously be read metaphorically as a celebrated farewell to the innocence of childhood, yet the religious connotation of the term is undeniably there, and the whole episode conveys a sense of grief over the dead body of the animal as if it were a lost human presence. Even though the tone of the narrator remains flat, unemotional and impersonal, delivering the story with almost behaviouristic precision, the characters’ actions seem suddenly solemn, administering the funeral rites to the mother rat with extraordinary tenderness and care. Kneeling by the dead rodent has the appearance of a prayer, standing like a guard resembles holding a wake over the body, while returning the womb in its place and closing the split in the pregnant belly may be an attempt at the rat’s healing and redeeming.

The scene, followed importantly by the gesture of bringing the hunted eel back to the quay, a symbolic renunciation of further violence, may thus be taken to evoke a sense of compassion and sympathy with the killed animal which stems from picturing the creature as participating in the human religious ritual, as impossibly capable of being mourned, even though it is normally found repulsive. As a result, the ambiguous message of the story is much more than just a vivid comment on the painful process of the mature self’s formation; it also points to the sacrificial structure behind much of our thinking about animals, normally powered by the social depositories of symbolic power such as cultural or religious institutions. The structure can precisely be undermined from within, McEwan seems to be telling us, by applying religious imagery in

⁹ McEwan, *First Love, Last Rites*, 91.

¹⁰ Ryan, *Ian McEwan*, 10.

a transgressive, non-dualistic manner, no longer sustaining the human-animal dichotomy. And it is a common experience of vulnerability and mourning, a bitter-and-sweet lesson of shared human and animal finitude inviting also a spiritual reading that is able to explode the overwhelmingly sacrificial function of religion.

It may seem to be a reductive gesture to equate religion with affective dispositions. After all, religions are notoriously complicated systems of belief based on old philosophical traditions and interpretation of the Scriptures that have long governed human worldviews and generated various hypostases of the supernatural. Some of them are pernicious in their insistence on the unbridgeable gap between human and animal creation and on the narrow understanding of a religious message as directed solely at one (self-reflective and moral) species. It is thus imperative to dwell on the argument offered by Lisa Kemmerer, an author of the seminal book on animals in religious traditions,¹¹ that the foundational teachings of the world's most ancient and widespread religions do recognize a fundamental similarity between humans and animals in physical, psychological and cognitive terms. This translates into a call for the practice of compassion, nurturance and service which is directed at the weak and the needy, irrespective of where they belong in the hierarchy of beings. In Kemmerer's reading, it is empathy and its emotional correlates, such as generosity, charity, kindness and benevolence, that constitute the essence of the religious mode of being, not dogma or faith. Such a view strips religion of its ideological pretence in favour of the pious and respectful attitude to the wide world. The religious teachings Kemmerer studies grow out of respect for the lives of all beings, the coexistence of which is both a divine gift and a moral challenge. However, she also frankly admits that her book "is about what religions teach, not about how religious people live. In truth, there appears to be embarrassingly little correlation between the two."¹² The religious appeal for compassion and protection of the weak have not prevented believers of diverse doctrines from engaging in exploitation, abuse and slaughter of nonhuman animals, and that has been for systemic rather than idiosyncratic reasons. It is thus equally important to draw attention to affective dispositions intertwined with religious motivations and to examine the roots of the callous treatment of other than human species that seem to be embedded in some religions more than in the others.

¹¹ Lisa Kemmerer, *Animals and World Religions* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4–5.

¹² Kemmerer, *Animals and World Religions*, 10.

Sacrificial Ideology and the Emancipatory Power of Mourning: David Herbert Lawrence

A quasi-religious quality of animal lives suffering cruelty and death at the hand of the deeply troubled humans is also foregrounded in the late poetic oeuvre of David Herbert Lawrence. Quite similarly, the famous animal poems in his 1923 volume *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* focus on the themes of vulnerability, mourning and compassion that are discussed with reference to the creatures the author finds most alien in the human-dominated world. Picturing reptiles, insects and fish, the volume offers a selection of strange and repulsive creatures that frustrate the human effort at communication and trigger socially conditioned violent responses. What is unique in Lawrence's poetic universe is the image of the narrator being simultaneously involved in acts of violence which lead to the destruction of animal individuals and in the resistance to violence by expressing his sympathy and repentance.¹³ In some of the gestures, at stake is the same process of masculine self-constitution based on the vehement display of patriarchal power as the one demonstrated in McEwan's story. The animals' otherness, construed as a threat, provokes a response in the form of the aggressive assertion of physical and symbolic superiority. Religion enters the stage in a complicated way: it is both partly responsible for the sacrificial ideology that sustains a human propensity for violence, and engaged in the process of gradually endowing animals with new agency as spiritual beings. These two contradictory impulses suggest an expansion of the notion of the religious that I would like to turn to later on and examine in more detail.

Lawrence's animal poems abound with and almost delight in violent and menacing gestures towards nonhuman beings. Some of them are presented jokingly, a hyperbolic depiction of the human meeting with a ferocious beast, like the imagined fight with the mosquito that ends with its killing or the pursuit of a half-blinded bat which finds its way to the poet's room and gets stuck there in broad daylight. Other encounters are narrated more reflectively: the spectacle of aggressive patriarchy in *Snake* or the fishing episode filled with theological deliberations on animal otherness in *Fish*. However, apart from the constant references to the violence of confrontation that has clearly sacrificial overtones, the poems highlight a number of religious tropes which are far removed from

¹³ The same ambivalent stance towards animals was noted in Lawrence's prose. See the discussion of *The Plumed Serpent* in the book by Carrie Rohman, where she states that the novel "contains a complex species economy that maintains *and* resists the distinction between human and animal by foregrounding connection between eating and power." Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject. Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 53.

Christian teaching. Lawrence deliberately toys with the idea of alterity in his representation of animals as he chooses to depict what is most repulsive and alien to human nature: reptiles, insects and fish. The selection of creatures foregrounds their inalienable otherness, conceived of both as ontological/epistemological difference and religious/theological transcendence.

The animals in Lawrence's poems are thus openly celebrated as divine or sacred, yet the unorthodox classification is there merely to confirm that they belong to another religious universe. Dwelling on their often unfortunate symbolism in the European culture, the author is explicit about the creatures' non-Christian origin. They are found strange, ungraspable, and beyond understanding, their existence defying all expectations and constituting what is an unfathomable mystery. That is why the Lawrentian poems picture them repeatedly as primordial and amoral, prior to the establishment of the familiar theological structure explaining the joys and sorrows of the world with recourse to the Logos of the Trinitarian God and the reign of universal love. Their unconscious, undivided existence immersed in the world of its own (holy in the Bataillian sense¹⁴) knows nothing of the Christian metaphysics and its hierarchy of creation. The animals emerge thus, on the one hand, as innocent, unaware of speculative distinctions, and inherently religious in their intimacy with nature, and, on the other, as readily susceptible to epistemological and real violence which stems from the human, often religiously grounded usurpation of power.

If Lawrence's poetic self does everything to emphasize the transcendence of animal beings he encounters, he also makes it clear that they are inevitably trapped in the sacrificial structure of Western religious thinking wherein the human claim to supremacy is articulated through the subordination of animals and the service of their humble bodies, simultaneously deprived of any religious value. It is only with immense difficulty that one can break out of this mental prison house by pondering one's own culturally-conditioned gestures towards other creatures. Yet the ultimate escape from the logic of sacrifice in Lawrence becomes paradoxically possible by means of religious affect: regret, compassion and grief. Mourning animals and pointing to the possibility of animal emotion with a potential religious meaning is the poet's attempt at subverting the structure of domination and endowing their silent victims with the capacity to assert their silent social presence and religious subjectivity. It is crucially impor-

¹⁴ In Bataille's work, the sacred is conceived of as the opposite of transcendence (which introduces hierarchy and alienation) and as the rejection of the profane world of utility in favour of that of primeval animality, immanence and natural immediacy. The most famous animal phrase in Bataille states that "every animal is in the world like water in water." See Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 19, 23-25; he also refers to animality as "divine continuity of living things with the world" (35). See also *Negative Ecstasies. Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

tant that this subversive intent can only be articulated beyond the framework of European religions which tend to pride themselves on their anthropo- and logocentrism. Lawrence's religious universe is deeply animist, recognizing and celebrating a multitude of spiritual beings beyond the human realm.¹⁵

An inventory of violent gestures towards animals in Lawrence's poems starts with his most well-known and anthologized animal poem, *Snake*. The narrative of the authorial self's encounter with a possibly venomous reptile in Taormina, Sicily, begins by staging the scene and meticulously describing a creature that the speaker interestingly identifies by means of a personal pronoun: it is "he" or "someone" who came to drink at the water-trough, and who was there first, preceding a human being. The first stanzas are almost exclusively devoted to an account of the snake's appearance and behaviour, provided with much detail. The animal is viewed as proceeding slowly, deliberately and contemplatively: "He lifted his head [...], / And looked at me vaguely, [...], And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment / And stooped and drank a little more."¹⁶ The poetic strategy seems thus to be all about treating the animal being as a figure of primary importance and marginalizing the narrator as a representative of his species who stands there transfixed and is forced to wait for his turn. In Derrida's discussion of the poem, the position of a human being as a "second comer", of the poetic self as coming "after" whoever might be there, is indicative of the formation of the Levinasian relation to the Other that is able to respect the radical claims of hospitality.¹⁷

The constitution of the primordial ethical relationship is, however, disturbed once the narrator invokes the voices of his education that suggest killing the animal in order to give proof of his masculine prowess ("The voice of my education said to me / He must be killed / For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous. / And voices in me said, If you were a man / You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off"¹⁸). The two attitudes coexist and contradict each other but it is notable that the poetic self identifies himself more willingly with his deeply felt need to respect and revere the creature. This is a confession that he feels obliged to make ("But must I confess how I liked him"), despite a sense of imminent danger and a culture-

¹⁵ Lawrence imagines spirituality as a powerful mode of being available to every creature, inherent in its nature, and contributing to the overall religious quality of the world. The universe is suffused with the spirit because it is all alive, a sacred source of living energy that does not reside in self-consciousness. For a more detailed study of Lawrence's understanding of animism, see Luke Ferretter, *The Glyph and the Gramophone. D. H. Lawrence's Religion* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 282.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. I, trans. G. Bennington (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 239-241.

¹⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 282-283.

grounded wish to assert his supremacy. The choice of words to express the moral ambivalence about the snake is striking:

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
 Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
 Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
 I felt so honoured. [...]
 And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
 But even so, honoured still more
 That he should seek my hospitality
 From out the dark door of the secret earth.¹⁹

Recognizing the ethical obligation that he has as a host welcoming the stranger, the narrator nevertheless places himself in the position of a devotee. It is more than an ethical relationship that binds him to the reptile encountered at the water-trough. He is tempted to refer to the animal as a divine being, a “god”: the one whose mere presence makes one feel afraid, honoured and humiliated. The mixture of reverence and fear expressed at the scene, “constructing a sort of religious subject-position in response to the snake,”²⁰ is however counterbalanced by the final use of violence. Throwing a log at the snake, succumbing to the compulsion to kill the creature, stems from a decision to follow the entrenched sacrificial logic of human society, even though the action is immediately regretted. The assertion of the speaker’s white male subjectivity seems thus to necessitate aggression towards the animal in and beyond himself as a violent reintroduction of implicit social hierarchy. Yet it is vitally important to note that the gesture does not entail a rejection of the affective state that made the poetic self previously bow to what he sensed as the divine. A sense of awe and respect is still there, reinforced by overwhelming feelings of sympathy and regret. The poet’s final admission is that of the need for expiation, again a religious term suggesting sin and a concomitant act of penance. Not knowing whether he injured the animal or not, the narrator is already prepared to mourn the victimized animal. Hence his portrayal of the creature’s vulnerable constitution and his readiness to grieve what is clearly an instance of ungrievable life (Butler) may aid in redeeming and emancipating the latter, in both ethical and religious terms.

The snake, an abominable and fearsome presence to most human witnesses, is thus finally celebrated as “one of the lords of life” and “a king in exile”, while the narrator regrets his “pettiness,” a narrow-minded response of disgust and cowardice that results in causing pain and violating the “godly” integrity of the

¹⁹ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 283.

²⁰ Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*, 93.

other creature.²¹ A similar scene of the display of vulnerability, violence and mourning is captured in the long narrative of the *Fish*. The poem itself has been read from many angles and there is not enough room here to examine the diverse interpretative options in detail. Still, it seems that the structure of the narrative is similar to that of the previously discussed poem, in the first part effacing the role of the narrator and offering a painstaking portrayal of the fish's way of living, while in the second contemplating the poetic self's own response to an individual creature that is being hunted and made to suffer as a result of the ingrained human habit to treat non-human others as destined to be sacrificed.

The long description of what "fishness" is in the poem's first part is dominated by a sense of unfamiliarity and wonder at how distant an animal can be from the human ways of being and knowing the world. The fish is completely one with the watery element, without the need to distinguish between what touches and what is being touched; consequently, it does not yearn to enter into the relationship with others and remains free of sexual longings. Its strange being is better captured by means of pure affect: it wavers between *joie de vivre*, being playful in the rising and falling water ("submerged and wave-thrilled"), craving for food (vaguely identified) and fearing signs of possible danger around. Lawrence accentuates the otherness of the fish's sensation that has no sense of the self and thus no differentiated consciousness,²² representing a primordial, fully innocent way of living. As such, the creature appears to him as being scandalously external to both Western epistemology and Christian theology: "Loveless, and so lively! / Born before God was love, Or life knew loving. / Beautifully beforehand with it all."²³

Having stated that the fish defies any resemblance with the human world, the poet concludes the first part by indicating that his previous attempt at following and depicting the aqueous existence of the animal was in vain: no amount of anthropomorphic metaphorizing can do justice to this mysterious, unknowable way of being.²⁴ The fish is ultimately beyond the reach of both human knowledge and religious imagination: "And I said to my heart, there are limits / To you, my heart; / And to the one God. / Fish are beyond me. / Other Gods / Beyond my range ... gods beyond my God."²⁵ The gesture of recognizing the creature as both deeply religious and alien to human worship seems essential here, pointing to the limits of the familiar theological narrative picturing humans as having exclusive dominion over the universe. The narra-

²¹ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 284.

²² Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*, 95.

²³ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 271.

²⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert, *Acts of Attention. The Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, 2nd edition (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 171.

²⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 272.

tor finds it necessary to renounce his biblical mandate to govern the life and death of other beings as they are no longer Christian God's creation. The fact that they cannot be known or grasped undermines the human dream of the final mastery of nature. The animals transcend the boundaries of human understanding, and although their intimacy with the world suggests a depth of religious feeling, it is not the familiar notion of religion we are accustomed to. As Carrie Rohman aptly comments, "this admission of epistemological limitation destabilizes the traditional humanist subject position in which human supersedes animal as a matter of course."²⁶ And, we may add, it also points to a different account of religion as embodied affect, a way of responding to the world with wonder and joy that can be seen in different species, regardless of the standard cognitive view which makes religion a private property of the humankind. The poet's eagerness to dispose of the conventional theological wisdom based on the human-animal hierarchy is evident in his resolution to name other creatures as divine and religious, or belonging to the realm of "other gods" which is impenetrable to human reason.

What is especially interesting in Lawrence's poetry is that this broad understanding of religious behaviour must inevitably be confronted with the Western metaphysics based on the notion of innocent (animal) sacrifice. The narrator, having mentioned his sense of alienation at the sight of the fish moving in water, nevertheless embarks on his planned fishing adventure which makes the animal suffer, suffocate and die. The long description of the creature's suffering and passing away is intended to startle the reader and make him/her comprehend what the loss of an individual life means:

I have waited with a long rod
 And suddenly pulled a gold-and-greenish, lucent fish from below,
 And had him fly like a halo round my head,
 Lunging in the air on the line.
 Unhooked his gorping, water-horny mouth,
 And seen his horror-tilted eye,
 His red-gold, water-precious, mirror-flat bright eye;
 And felt him beat in my hand, with his mucous, leaping life-throb.
 And my heart accused itself
 Thinking: I am not the measure of creation. [...]
 And the gold-and-green pure lacquer-mucus comes off in my hand,
 And the red-gold mirror-eye stares and dies,
 And the water-suave contour dims.²⁷

The image of the fish in the fragment is particularly vivid, focusing on the colours and texture of the body and ascribing a range of feelings to the creature

²⁶ Rohman, *Stalking the Subject*, 98.

²⁷ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 272-273.

as it suffers and dies in the narrator's hand. The strategy of a long and detailed description seems intentionally applied here to highlight the importance of animal death as the loss of a precious, vulnerable life that makes the perpetrator (even though it is just a common activity of catching fish) feel immensely guilty about his act of violence and describe it with much detail. The death is incomprehensible and hardly justifiable in the fish's innocent universe which is portrayed as prior to the human world of intellect and theological deliberation: "He was born in front of my sunrise, / Before my day. / He outstarts me. / And I, a many-fingered horror of daylight to him, / Have made him die."²⁸ The poet pays tribute to the creature and thus regrets having fallen into the trap of sacrificial thinking. Moreover, he seems to be making a strenuous effort to imagine what his own otherness could mean to the dying fish. And it is due to this feat of poetic imagination that the final message of the narrative is one of compassion and mourning, including the animal in the range of vulnerable subjects worthy of human recognition and religious celebration, even if the aim is achieved by strangely unorthodox means. The final lines of the poem identify the fish with Jesus as an innocent victim, an unknown divinity who cannot but fall prey to fatal misrecognition.

A number of Lawrence's animal poems seem to repeat the same pattern, focusing on the entrenched human tendency to follow the logic of sacrifice and to slay the opposing creature (usually depicted as alien and hideous) in what is often a scene of hunting, while the poetic intervention consists in questioning the inevitability of the action on philosophical and religious grounds. In many of the descriptive passages one is struck by the emphasis on the creature's fragility and its capacity for affective response. In *Man and Bat* for example, repulsive as he finds the animal, the narrator nevertheless notes his blindness, despair and exhaustion, helping the bat out of the room. "I didn't create him" is an argument against injuring the impossible-looking creature, while saving it is regarded as a basic moral obligation, part of the human "wide-eyed responsibility in life."²⁹ The poetic self appears to be conscious of the way his potential violence could affect the balance of life and resists the temptation to continue his hunting until the very end. Yet, the violent confrontation highlighting animal vulnerability and a sense of complicity are still there, posing the question of whether the bat's is also a life to grieve and sympathize with. The poet's tentative answer is affirmative as there must have been a religious ground in the bat's existence.

In another of Lawrence's hunting poems, *Mountain Lion*, there is no doubt about the hunted creature's preciousness and its sudden death leads to an all-pervading sense of grief. The poem tells a story of the encounter with two Mexican hunters in the mountains of Texas and reports a short conversation

²⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 273.

²⁹ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 280.

with them as the narrator notices they are carrying a carcass of the mountain lion they hunted beforehand. The poet is first ironic about their appearance with weapons ("Men! The only animal in the world to fear!"³⁰) and then provides the reader with a painstaking description of the big cat showing her lost beauty. The fragment is a wonderful photographic close-up of the animal, accumulating adjectives and repeating words as if caressing the dead body:

It is a mountain lion.
 A long, long slim cat, yellow like a lioness.
 Dead.
 He trapped her this morning, he says, smiling foolishly.
 Lift up her face,
 Her round, bright face, bright as frost.
 Her round, fine-fashioned head, with two dead ears;
 And stripes in the brilliant frost of her face, sharp, fine dark rays,
 Dark, keen, fine rays in the brilliant frost of her face.
 Beautiful dead eyes.
 Hermoso es!³¹

In the remaining part of the poem, the narrator goes further on in a plaintive mood and finds the empty lair of the animal. Mourning her still detectable presence, the beauty and precision of her movements ("So, she will never leap up that way again, with the yellow flash of a mountain lion's long shoot"), the poetic self ponders the loss with long, descriptive sentences. At the end of the passage, the animal's life is remarkably pictured as a gap in the world not to be filled by any of her species. The poem is thus extraordinary in its insistence on commemorating an individual vulnerable body which belongs to an animal. It does not mention religion but instead it manages to perform the last rites for the creature, giving vent to the narrator's anger over her death and grieving the loss with carefully selected words. The precarious life of an animal is celebrated and mourned in the public, which also allows the vexed question of hunting to come to the fore of social discussion.

Towards the Cross-Species Understanding of Religion

As the handful of the foregoing literary examples may illustrate, the aesthetic strategy of empathizing with dying and dead animals can be viewed as much

³⁰ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 330.

³¹ In Spanish: it is beautiful. D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, 330-331.

more than just another proof of the writer's moral sensitivity to the lot of animals victimized by human industry and their dispensable bodies. Rather than just working towards a redefinition of the human-animal relationship on the basis of the human capacity for compassion that can go beyond the species barrier, the discussed authors have managed both to highlight the sacrificial mentality behind the unrestrained human desire to kill and to record the need for mourning the victim that transgresses the subject-object dichotomy and emancipates the creature in that it affirms its possible inclusion in the community of spiritual beings. The representation of a vulnerable animal existence as precious, unique and mournable, especially to the human perpetrator of violence, together with the use of religious imagery that casts different light on a dying or dead creature, signals the writer's willingness to administer "the last rites" to the animal as a sentient individual with the affective experience of its own, irrespective of how much (or little) it resembles a human being. These gestures of grief and remembrance, set against the animal practices of mourning that have long been traced by ethologists, bring the animal world close to what has so far been considered an exclusively anthropological privilege: the realm of ritual and spirituality. The socially transgressive, non-dualistic imagery of the works has the effect of exploding the sacrificial function of religious metaphysics and of endowing animals with new agency as religious subjects. Is it however possible to generalize the writers' intuition and discuss animals as agents in the sense the term is used in religious studies?

The question of the religious subjectivity of animals, despite its controversial nature, have undoubtedly drawn the attention of scholars of religion in recent years. For instance, in the 2013 book *Animals as Religious Subjects*,³² a number of researchers from various fields have striven to address the place of other creatures in religious practice and experience, not just as companions and objects of theological or ethical reflection, but also as subjects/agents partaking in religious phenomena. The very idea of animal religiosity may be enough to raise one's eyebrows: the prevalent tendency among scholars until the end of the 20th century has been to locate the capacity for religious behaviour (following Emile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade as the most influential theoreticians of religious phenomena) in the ability to develop an understanding of the sacred-profane binary, a complex conceptual operation apparently accessible only to humans.³³ Moreover, for the classical philosophy of religion, it is a sphere of spiritual activity predicated on the sense of freedom, moral agency and use of speculative reason, all of which enable the human being to transcend the physical domain

³² *Animals as Religious Subjects. Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. C. Deane-Drummond, D.L. Clough and R. Artinian-Kaiser (London–New Delhi–New York–Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013).

³³ See Aaron Gross, "The Study of Religion after the Animal," in *Animals as Religious Subjects*, 59–78.

and reach that of metaphysical and absolute values.³⁴ In other words, it is by developing religion that a human creature becomes capable of outgrowing the condition of animality, synonymous here with an unconscious and purely instinctive way of living. Yet if the quality of not-being-an-animal is deemed the quintessence of religion, the notion of animal religious behaviour must be perceived as a contradiction in terms. There is therefore no possibility to refer to the classical definition of religion in an attempt to recognize other creatures as spiritual or involved in the social ritual that may have a protoreligious function and meaning.

Instead of drawing on the canonical approaches which are often guilty of essentialist binarisms, it is illuminating to have a look at the evolution of academic reflection within religious studies, a field that in the last fifty years has moved from the ahistorical view of religion as the depository of transcendent values guarded by the universal *homo religiosus* and from the emphasis on the manifold manifestations of the sacred in world religions to the perception that religious ritual and beliefs are inextricable from systems of power.³⁵ These power relations have also shaped the very distinction between what may be labelled religious (i.e., human discovery and experience of the holy, predicated on cognitive abilities) and what may not. It is thus essential to come up with a new definition of religion, one that would endeavour to bypass these age-old distinctions by elaborating on a different, post-Darwinian paradigm of thinking which sees human behaviour and cultural expression as continuous with that of the animal world. Admittedly, animals may not be interested in developing metaphysics (at least, the brand of metaphysics familiar to human beings in the West, as they lack the mental and linguistic apparatus to create and articulate it), but the affective and ritualistic response of some species to natural phenomena they find intriguing (as well as to the passing away of their fellows) seems to be worth examining in the religious framework. If in the course of the 20th century faith has come to be understood as a complex of symbols, texts, narratives and performances produced against the background of history and politics, the recent turn of scholarly interest to embodiment and lived affect may provide a much needed corrective to the earlier overemphasis on cognitive and linguistic dimensions of religious experience. In the neo-materialist perspective that is offered by Donovan O. Schaefer, animals are considered religious subjects as bodies, not just minds. The proposed move towards flows of affect does not, however, eliminate the political and historical dimension of religion,

³⁴ See the explication of the meaning and function of religion in various scholarly traditions in Zofia J. Zdybicka's work *Religia a religioznawstwo* [*Religion vs. Religious Studies*] (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2013), especially chapters on "Religious Studies and Philosophy" and "Phenomenology of Religion" (253-260).

³⁵ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affect. Animality, Evolution and Power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 5.

whether human or animal: this is because systems of power operate primarily before and beyond language. “The linguistic fallacy misunderstands religion as merely a by-product of language, and misses the economies of affect – economies of pleasure, economies of rage and wonder, economies of sensation, of shame and dignity, of joy and sorrow, of community and hatred – that are the animal substance of religion and other forms of power.”³⁶ If religion is about how we feel towards the wide world and whether we respond to it with love, joy, wonder, fascination and respect or with anger and anguish – affects which make it pulsate with spiritual meanings – it is perhaps possible to identify the capacity for religious behaviour in other-than-human species as they socially manifest these bodily attitudes.

The quest for the manifestations of other-than-human spirituality and proto-religious behaviour has also taken the form of searching for a trans-species definition of religion, one that would eschew anthropocentric, anthropomorphic and logocentric biases in order to identify the possible precursors of ritual in animals such as great apes. In his pioneering work on the topic,³⁷ James B. Harrod makes it clear that the need for a cross-species comparison of religious behaviour, while discounted by anthropologists and theologians, has been repeatedly voiced by ethologists on the basis of their empirical observations (evidence of animal rituals at sunrise and sunset, ritualistic responses to death and wonders of nature). His attempt at formulating a definition of religion free of anthropocentric elements and non-observable, mental constructs involves using a semantic analysis procedure to investigate the dictionary meanings of religious phenomena as they function in the human culture. A prototypical definition of human religion the author produces is then scrutinized to distil the elements that are suitable for a trans-species application. The definition of human religion refers thus to the elements of ritualization, community and “empathic intimacy with respect to experiences of aliveness and animacy,”³⁸ while the most common components of religious behaviour include worship and reverence, ceremony and careful observance, sacrifice, as well as the response to the numinous, the holy and the sacred (wonder, awe, dread, fear). This elucidation is further simplified to serve the purpose of describing potential instances of animal religion. To act religiously, according to the author, is thus to respond ritually to experiences of aliveness and animacy within a community bound by empathic intimacy, and the behaviour is accompanied by intense affects or exceptional states of mind. Importantly, this trans-species definition of religion yields a list of responses that have actually been observed by ethologists. Having examined

³⁶ Schaefer, *Religious Affect*, 9.

³⁷ See James B. Harrod, “A Trans-Species Definition of Religion,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2011), 327–353.

³⁸ Harrod, “A Trans-Species Definition of Religion,” 343.

its components, Harrod arrives at a conclusion that it is indeed feasible to apply the words religion/spirituality beyond the human realm.

It seems that both the neo-materialist turn in religious studies discussed briefly above and the semantic analysis of the definition of religion point to the possibility of recognizing at least some animals as spiritual beings and religious subjects. Notably, the recognition of their religious behaviour does not rest on the presumption of cognitive and linguistic abilities but on the capacity for communal affect and elements of ritualization observed in empirical research. Still, even such a weakened notion of animal religion seems to pose a challenge to the theological notion of human uniqueness.

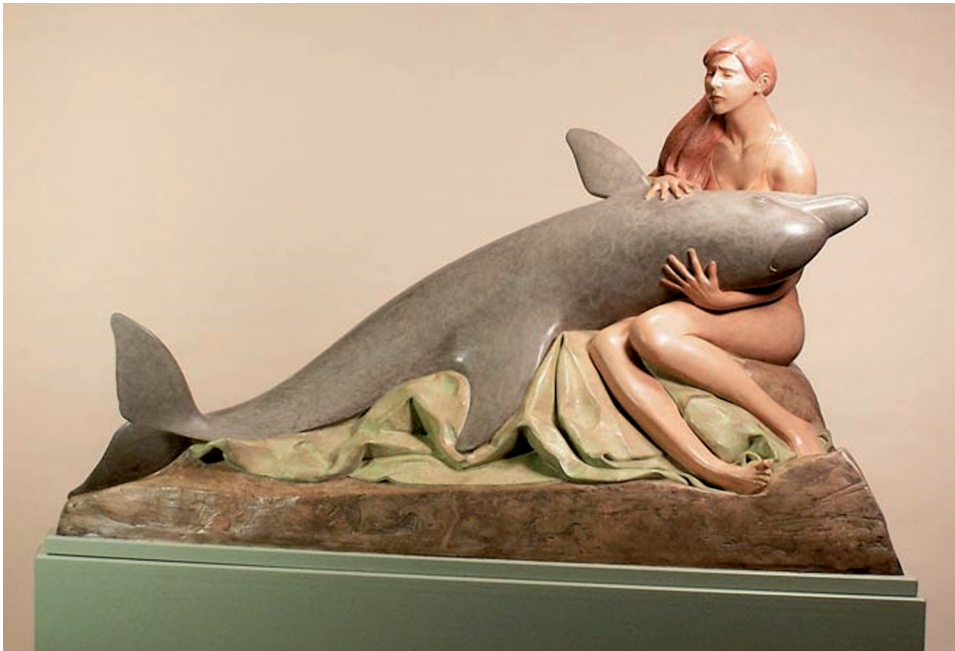
Conclusion

To summarize, it is clearly significant when animal death is placed in the framework of religious meanings and gestures. In works of literature and art, it has a startling quality that makes us interrogate the limits of our compassionate imagination, as do Ian McEwan's story and D.H. Lawrence's poems. The powerful reverberations of the gesture can be further evidenced in the sculpture accompanying this essay, Russell Wray's *Pieta*, which uses a well-established religious iconography of human sorrow and mourning to grieve over and protest against the lost animal presence.³⁹ If the Western tradition defines animals as fundamentally opposed to spirituality and religion (understanding the latter as involving first and foremost cognitive attitudes that underlie social behaviour, a broadly shared Protestant view linked to the processes of modern disenchantment), the application of religious imagery by some 20th-century writers and artists while accounting for the human treatment of animals, as well as the observations made by researchers referring to rituals in animal communities, may suggest there is a possibility of changing and expanding the predominant notion of religiosity to include animals and their experience of the world. As the anthropologist Barbara J. King states when she compares human grief to animal mourning, *anthropos* may be the only species "capable of self-transcendence and awe in the face of the unknowable," "but I don't wish to assume that no other self-aware animals experience a glimmer of spiritual feeling," and even human individuals "grieve with human words but animal bodies and animal gestures

³⁹ Russell Wray, born 1955, is an American sculptor and environmental activist currently based in Hancock, Maine. His work focuses on human and animal figures, which are often strikingly juxtaposed. In one of his *Pieta* terracotta sculptures, this juxtaposition involves a woman grieving over a dead dolphin, a curious repetition of the famous Christian image of Mary holding and contemplating Jesus' dead body (see the following page).

and animal movements.”⁴⁰ There surely is a line of continuity between different forms of religious affect and the conclusion may greatly aid in undermining the age-old distinctions.

It is thus gradually becoming possible to reimagine religion as something deeply embodied, an affective disposition that grows out of the individual and socially shared response to the mystery, wonder, tragedy and suffering in the enviroing world, which is what finally binds us to the animal realm rather than sets us apart. This neo-materialist “reorientation to animal religion calls us to look not only at the limits of language, belief, and text in circumscribing the totality of religious experience, but to the irreducible plurality of religions, the heterogeneous multiplicity of religious bodies.”⁴¹ It converts religion, as a domain of bodily ritual response and affective resonance, into the cross-species experience whose existence, if recognized and affirmed, is capable of unsettling established hierarchies and empowering other-than-human creatures. Even if it does not mean the elimination of sacrificial ideology altogether (which is there both to sanction the denial of animal religious agency and omnipresent violence to animals), it seems to be a step in the right direction.



Russell Wray, *Pieta* (reproduced by courtesy of the author)

⁴⁰ Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 147, 152.

⁴¹ Donovan O. Schaefer, “Do Animals Have Religion?,” 186.

Abstrakt

Śmierć zwierząt a religia:
próba redefinicji zwierzęcego cierpienia, żałoby i ofiary

Choć kwestia zwierzęcej śmierci i umierania od dawna zwraca uwagę badaczy z kręgu *animal studies*, coraz częstsze jej pojawianie się w obszarze studiów religioznawczych jest zjawiskiem interesującym i stosunkowo nowym, które domaga się rozważenia. W badaniach ogniskujących się na religii coraz więcej uwagi poświęca się ostatnio nie tyle rozmaitym znaczeniom, jakie przypisywane są obecności zwierząt w ludzkim doświadczeniu religijnym (gdzie figurują one jako przedmioty, symbole i ciała), ile bardziej kontrowersyjnej kwestii samych zwierzęcych reakcji na śmierć istot im bliskich. Zdaniem niektórych badaczy, ta ostatnia może być także rozpatrywana jako rytualna i protoreligijna, co daje szansę na rewizję antropocentrycznego ujęcia religii jako fenomenu czysto kognitywnego. Sposoby przeżywania śmierci przez wyższe zwierzęta (jak dokumentuje to etologia), w dużej mierze zbiorowe i ceremonialne, podkreślające cielesną kruchość (*vulnerability*) i potrzebę wyrażenia żalu w rytuałach żałoby, wydają się bliskie ludzkiemu rozumieniu religijności jako szeregu społecznych zachowań, które stanowią odpowiedź na doświadczenie cierpienia, utraty i tajemnicy otaczającej czyjeś odejście. W tym kontekście istotne więc wydaje się zadanie pytania, dlaczego wszelka próba określenia zwierzęcych zachowań mianem religijnych budzi – wśród większości ludzi deklarujących swoją przynależność do wiary – niemal instynktowne negatywne reakcje. Jakie procesy semiotyczne, filozoficzne i polityczne przyczynić się mogły do uznania, że religia to obszar czysto ludzki, a co więcej, definiowany przez pryzmat różnicy ludzko-zwierzęcej? Czy istnieje coś, co Derrida nazwałby trwałą ofiarniczą strukturą zachodniego myślenia (gdzie pojęcie ofiary oznaczałoby nie tylko powszechną zgodę na przemoc wobec zwierząt, usankcjonowanie faktu ich śmierci na potrzeby człowieka, ale także zamknięcie przed zwierzętami możliwości udziału w tym, co religijne w charakterze innym niż przedmiot ofiary)? Artykuł podejmuje te kwestie, argumentując na rzecz zwierzęcej religijności, opierając się na nieantropocentrycznym ujęciu żałoby w pracach Judith Butler oraz analizując literackie i artystyczne strategie przedstawiania śmierci zwierząt, które poprzez swoje akcentowanie wymiaru religijnego zyskują emancypacyjny charakter, w utworach D.H. Lawrence’a oraz Iana McEwana.

Słowa kluczowe:

religioznawstwo, duchowość zwierząt, śmierć zwierząt, kruchość, żałoba

Абстракт

Смерть животных и религия:
попытка определить заново страдания, скорбь и жертву животных

Хотя проблема смерти и умирания животных давно привлекает внимание исследователей *animal studies*, то обращение к этой теме религиоведов является интересным и относительно недавним явлением, требующим рассмотрения. В исследованиях, затрагивающих проблемы религии, в последнее время все больше внимания уделяется не столько различным значениям, которые приписываются присутствию животных в религиозном опыте человека (где они существуют как объекты, символы и тела), сколько вопросам самих реакций животных на смерть близких им людей. По мнению некоторых исследователей, реакции последних могут также считаться ритуальными и проторелигиозными, что дает возможность пересмотреть антропоцентрический подход к религии как к чисто когнитивному явлению. Способы пережить смерть высшими животными (как это документирует этология), в основном коллективные и церемониальные, подчеркивая телесную уязвимость животных (*vulnerability*) и необходимость выражать свои чувства в ритуалах скорби, кажутся близкими к человеческому пониманию религиозности как

ряда вариантов социального поведения, которые являются реакцией на опыт страдания, потери и тайны, окружающих чей-то уход. В этом контексте представляется важным задать вопрос, почему любая попытка определить поведение животных как религиозное – среди верующих людей – вызывает почти инстинктивную негативную реакцию. Какие семиотические, философские и политические процессы способствовали признанию того, что религия относится к сфере человеческой жизни, более того, она определяет разницу между человеком и животным? Есть ли что-то, что Деррида назвал бы постоянной жертвенной структурой западного мышления (где понятие жертвы означало бы не только всеобщее согласие на насилие по отношению к животным, подтверждающее факт их гибели для человеческих нужд, но также лишение животных возможности участвовать в отправлении религиозных культов не в качестве жертвы)? В статье рассматриваются эти вопросы, приводятся аргументы в пользу религиозности животных, основой для которых являются работы Джудит Батлер о неантропоцентрическом подходе к трауру. Кроме того анализируются литературные и художественные стратегии изображения смерти животных, которые, подчеркивая свое религиозное измерение, приобретают характер освобождения в произведениях Д.Г. Лоуренса и Иэна Макьюэна.

Ключевые слова:

религиоведение, духовность животных, смерть животных, уязвимость, скорбь